

## History of Books: A Syllabus

Coordinator: Walker Rumble

Meetings: Tuesdays, 1-3 p.m., at Temple Bel El  
Eight weeks, September 25-November 13

Course Description: Everybody seems to think books are doomed. What better time to take a look at how they've made it so far! Books have evolved from papyrus scrolls to Penguin paperbacks, with *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and Deadwood Dick in between—not to mention “The Great Cat Massacre” along the way. We'll explore the “bookishness” of books. We'll take library field trips. We'll find our way among many riches.

Course Assumptions: Books are a fundamental part of communication systems. They gather thoughts, fix those thoughts onto paper, and distribute the result to a reading public. How a process of manufacture and delivery gets done affects how (and how much) we digest those ideas. It's useful to have these things in mind. What we discover and discuss simply should interest and delight us.

Course text: Martyn Lyons, *Books: A Living History*

Course participants are encouraged to obtain and read the entire book as soon as possible and re-read the appropriate chapter assignment each week. You can order the book from Amazon or your favorite local bookstore (perhaps Books on the Square, nearby). The Amazon price for the book ranges from \$20 to \$25. The book-search website [www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com) can supply you with options from \$10 to \$15.

Field Trips:

The group will take three of these. We'll move entire afternoon meetings to the Providence Public Library (October 30), Providence Athenaeum (November 6), and Brown's Hay Library (November 13).

Classroom structure:

1. Check out the extensive list of subjects that follow and pick two to report on (pick three or four, actually, in order of your preference). You'll talk about your topic for 20-25 minutes. Your comments should generally inform us, and along the way deal with these questions:
  - What makes this book special?
  - When and where was it produced?
  - How was it produced? What bookmaking technology?
  - Where might one go to see the original edition of this book?
  - Why this pick? What has made this book (or subject) especially interesting to you?

**Class members should supply the class coordinator—[walker.rumble@gmail.com](mailto:walker.rumble@gmail.com)—with their report choices, in order of preference, as soon as possible. Some topics may be more popular than others. I'll try to accommodate your first two choices, and failing that the next ones on your list.**

2. For a second part of your presentation, maybe 15-20 minutes, each of you will present an old book of your own and tell us about it, addressing the questions above, plus what the book has meant personally.

## Class Meetings and Report Suggestions

Meeting one, 9/25: Organizational

Meeting two, 10/2: Ancient and Medieval  
READ Lyons, *Books: A Living History*, chapter 1

Report subjects:

- **Diamond Sutra** (China, 868)  
(the earliest surviving dated, printed book)
- **Codex Sinaiticus** (Sinai, 330-360)  
(there are hundreds of canonical Bible editions, this one's the first)
- **Lindisfarne Gospels** (Ireland, 715-720)  
(a remote Irish monk makes an astonishing book)
- **Book of Kells** (Ireland, 800)  
(maybe the greatest illuminated manuscript of them all)
- **Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry** (France, 1412-1416—a book of hours)  
(or maybe this one is the greatest illuminated manuscript of them all)

Meeting three, 10/9: Printing Incunabula  
READ Lyons, *Books: A Living History*, chapter 2

Report subjects:

- Johann Gutenberg's **Mainz Bible** (Germany, 1455)  
(Gutenberg, the "man of the millennium," right?)
- Fust and Schoeffer's **Mainz Psalter** (Germany, 1457)  
(what is a "beatus initial," anyway?)
- Ottaviano Petrucci, **Harmonice Musices Odhecaton** (Italy, 1501)  
(printing a music book, how hard is that?)
- William Caxton, **Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye** (Flanders, 1473)  
(the first book printed in English)
- Joshua Solomon Soncino, **Berakhot** (Italy, 1483)  
(the first printed tractate of the Talmud)

Meeting four, 10/16: The Invention of Our Books  
READ Lyons, *Books: A Living History*, chapter 2

Report subjects:

- Aldus Manutius, **Hypnerotomachia Poliphili** (Italy, 1499)  
(a lover's dream world; a printer's masterpiece)
- Johannes Oporinus's **Vesalius, On the Fabric of the Human Body** (Basel, 1543)  
(the most famous book in the history of medical science)
- Christof Plantin, **Polyglot Bible** (Belgium, 1568-1573)  
(16th-century Antwerp was the bookmaking hotspot in all of Europe)
- Stephen Day's **Bay Psalm Book** (Cambridge, 1640)  
(America's first book: scripturally accurate; musically unsingable)
- Benjamin Franklin, **Cicero's Cato Major** (Philadelphia, 1744)  
(Poor Richard was okay; Ben wanted his Cicero to be splendid)

Meeting five, 10/23: Typography  
READ Lyons, *Books: A Living History*, chapter 3

Report subjects:

- Classic typefaces: **Bembo, Caslon, and Garamond**
- Transitional and “modern” typefaces: **Baskerville, Bodoni, and Helvetica**
- 20th-century type designers: **Hermann Zapf** (Palatino, Optima) OR **Eric Gill** (Perpetua, Gill Sans) OR **Bruce Rogers** (Centaur) OR **Stanley Morison** (Times New Roman)

Meeting six, 10/30: Nineteenth Century  
READ Lyons, *Books: A Living History*, chapter 4  
**FIELD TRIP:** Providence Public Library

**At the library,** report subjects:

- **Berkeley Updike**, *Book of Common Prayer*  
(Providence has a rich bookmaking history; what was different about Updike?)
- **Oscar Harpel**, *Harpel's Typograph* and *Poets & Poetry of Printerdom*  
(Harpel would make bookmaking an art if it killed him; it did)
- **Dime novels:** Beadle, Deadwood Dick, Buffalo Bill  
(“freedom” and the American faith)

Meeting seven, 11/6: Arts and Crafts  
**FIELD TRIP:** Providence Athenaeum  
READ Lyons, *Books: A Living History*, chapter 5

**At the library,** report subjects:

- **Elbert Hubbard's Roycroft:** *Song of Songs, White Hyacinths, The Last Ride*  
(how is fine bookmaking like selling soap?)
- **William Morris**, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*  
(Kelmscott Press—mecca of melancholy medievalists)
- **Theodore Low De Vinne**, the De Vinne Press  
(tycoons in printerdom)
- Robert Darnton, **The Great Cat Massacre**  
(the prototype “artisanal” private press)

Meeting eight, 11/13: Into the Twentieth Century  
**FIELD TRIP:** Hay Library, Brown  
READ Lyons, *Books: A Living History*, conclusion

**At the library,** report subjects:

- **Will Ransom**, the Series of First Volumes  
(the artist as printer; the printer as artist)
- **Alderbrink Press**, and Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine  
(“lit mags” are everywhere; this is the mother of them all)
- **Jan Tschichold** and **Penguin** paperbacks  
(remember Aldus's little books and Griffio's italic type?)